

Alliance Foster Care

Alliance Foster Care Limited 04249271

1 Maple Court, Ash Lane, Collingtree, Northampton NN4 0NB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Alliance Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Northamptonshire. It is a standalone company that is part of the National Fostering Group. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging, and parent and child placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 53 households and 75 children under their care.

There is an experienced manager, who is registered with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 November 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 27 June 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are supported to make good progress. They have strong bonds with their foster carers, who speak with warmth and affection about the children in their care. One foster carer remarked that their child's progress was amazing. Foster carers had supported the child to no longer be 'scared of the world'. Foster carers described caring for this child as a privilege. Another foster carer described a quiet child transforming into a child who could now babble, walk and play.

Many children live with their foster carers for long periods, often several years. Foster carers are open to staying-put arrangements and there are examples of when this option is discussed at an early stage. Carers ensure that children attend school and health appointments, and receive specialist help when needed. Children benefit from activities that are suited to their individual needs and interests. They have opportunities to develop new skills, which help them to build confidence. For example, children are learning to drive, have part-time jobs, and are members of clubs.

Some children have had unplanned endings to their placements. The agency has implemented some new systems to support better placement endings for children. For example, stability meetings are being used more proactively. When foster carers have been unable to meet children's needs, the reasons have been discussed in supervision sessions. These discussions have informed matching decisions going forward. The team manager analyses the reasons for endings and whether the foster carers continue to be suitable. However, children's files do not contain child-centred information as to why their placement ended. This is necessary as part of supporting children's ongoing life story needs.

The fostering agency has recently started to increase oversight of children's disability benefits. Although some steps have been taken to improve practice in this area, it is not yet at a good standard. For example, children are not well informed about their monies, and decision-making about how children's monies are spent is not suitably recorded in children's records. Foster carers have not been offered specific training to support children in managing their money. For one child, there has not been enough joined-up working with the local authority to ensure that the child's money has been spent and saved accordingly.

Overall, fostering assessments are completed to a good standard. Necessary safety checks are carried out and evaluated by the fostering agency. Assessments are detailed and the narrative provides a clear overview of applicants' strengths and vulnerabilities. Assessments are completed within timescales and reports are quality assured prior to panel to ensure that regulatory standards are met. However, there is a pattern of some applicants not having at least one family reference. As such, important historical information about applicants could be missed.

Children with a plan for adoption are well supported by the fostering agency. When care planning delays occur, the supervising social worker has supported foster carers to work through these challenges. The foster carers receive support, and the children are seen regularly. Adoptive parents are encouraged to spend time with the children. Foster carers are good at recognising when children may be feeling unsettled. This information is then shared with the fostering agency. Foster carers recognise the importance of meaningful life-story work for the children.

Foster carers submit written records to the agency about the children in their care. These records vary in terms of quality and the frequency of submission. Some records include negative terminology about children, which can be stigmatising for them and impact negatively on how they are viewed by others. This is not helpful in terms of developing a positive sense of self as they grow and develop.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Overall, the agency is supporting foster carers to manage risks to children. There are some good examples where carers are keeping children safe. However, safe care documents and risk management plans do not always reflect the level of measures in place, even when carers are implementing a range of strategies. Consequently, there is the potential for confusion and misunderstanding about how children are being protected from harm.

The manager has improved practice regarding serious incidents involving children. She has introduced weekly safeguarding meetings where incidents are reviewed to ensure that appropriate actions are taken in a timely way.

Children's complaints are taken seriously. The manager ensures that relevant professionals are informed and kept updated. The fostering agency conduct their own investigations when necessary. The manager has supported one child effectively to make a complaint to the local authority when they felt dissatisfied with the care planning. The team manager has introduced a 'grumbles' tool for children to help ascertain children's ongoing wishes and feelings. The manager does not yet reply to children in writing to explain how complaints are being managed. This is important so that children understand what actions are being taken and when.

Supervising social workers are not yet managing all areas of safeguarding practice with foster carers effectively. For example, they are not checking on a regular basis that controlled medication is being stored safely. Foster carers are not showing professional curiosity when children are known to vape or ensuring that children understand the content of 'digital contracts' that are in place to keep them safe online.

Overall, foster carers receive specialist training when contextual safeguarding risks emerge for children. However, there was one example when a foster carer refused to complete the training and did not complete records in relation to the child.

Although these shortfalls were addressed clearly in supervision, a formal development plan was not introduced. This could impede the process of holding foster carers to account for their actions.

The agency does not yet have a system in place to adequately assess whether children are safe when living alongside children under shared lives arrangements. There is one example when this issue was recognised by the supervising social worker during supervision. However, there was no evidence of this having been discussed with the manager.

The fostering agency do not always keep track of which adults stay alongside children. Some of these adults are unknown to the fostering agency, despite them staying with the foster carers on a regular basis. Risk assessments for permanent household adults are considerably out of date. This is an area where there is a lack of joined up working with relevant professionals. The fostering agency accepts this shortfall and recognises that this is an area for development.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There has been a change of registered manager since the last inspection. There is also a new team manager and an advanced practitioner. The management team is embedding in terms of roles and relationships, and there is a commitment to improving and developing the service. The manager is more visible and there has been a real effort to connect with the staff team, the foster carers and the children.

The staff are happy in their work. They say that the new manager offers clearer direction and has a more responsive approach. There is increased stability and cohesiveness across the service, which has helped staff to feel more settled. Staff benefit from regular supervision and development, which enable them to reflect on their work. This also enables managers to maintain close oversight of children's progress.

Foster carers receive regular supervision, which they value. However, supervision sessions and records vary in terms of quality. The needs of children are discussed in detail and foster carers are asked about their well-being and training needs. Actions are set and reviewed. However, there is a pattern of some unmet actions tending to drift without being escalated to the manager. This has led to a delay in some performance issues being addressed.

Overall, foster carers state that they have supportive relationships with their supervising social workers. They are confident that if they need help, their queries and questions will be promptly responded to. Unannounced visits happen within timescales and children's bedrooms are seen. The manager has introduced a system where one unannounced visit will be undertaken by the non-allocated supervising social worker. This is to ensure that there is improved independent scrutiny of foster carer practice.

The manager ensures that annual reviews happen within timescales. When necessary, they are brought forward following allegations or concerns. There is good preparation for reviews. Statutory checks are completed, and stakeholder, foster carer and child feedback is gathered and evaluated.

The fostering panel is experienced and capable. There is good diversity among the members. The panel's experience is used well when considering concerns and allegations. There was a good example when the panel chair was proactive in seeking a response about how the fostering agency could be assured about a foster carer's continued suitability to foster.

Foster carers and prospective foster carers are well prepared for panel and understand the process. When panel recommendations are sent to the agency decision-maker, the rationale for decision-making is clear. Similarly, the agency decision-maker's viewpoint is equally well evidenced and is recorded in a timely way.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This relates to the registered person ensuring that risk assessments and care planning are in place when a child is being cared for alongside adults who are on a shared lives arrangement. This also relates to ensuring that supervising social workers regularly check the safe storage of controlled medication.</p>	<p>4 December 2023</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children can take up issues in the most appropriate way with support, without fear that this will result in any adverse consequences. Ensure that children receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and are kept informed of progress. (Fostering Service: National Minimum Standards page 9, paragraph 1.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards' page 9, paragraph 1.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards' page 14, paragraph 4.5)
- The registered person should ensure that children are supported to develop financial capability, knowledge and skills, and know about entitlements to financial

and other support after leaving care, including benefits and support from social care services. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards' page 25, paragraph 12.1)

- The registered person should ensure that where a child is eligible for benefits as a result of a disability, foster carers are encouraged to apply for those benefits. Ensure that there are regular recorded discussions about how any additional benefits are being spent to promote the best interests of the child. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards' page 55, paragraph 28.9)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers receive guidance and training to provide appropriate care if looking after children with complex health needs. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards' page 17, 6.8)
- The registered person should ensure that checks are carried out in line with regulation 26, and prospective foster carers understand why identity checks, relationship status and health checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken about them and why enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks are made on them and adult members of their household. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 29,13.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards' page 50, 25.2)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC033794

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Inspectors

Laura Walker, Social Care Inspector

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